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The Dynamics of Disinformation: Understanding How Pakistani Social Media Users Navigate and React to Fake News

Abstract: *This article is a critical venture into examining the dissemination of misinformation using social media in Pakistan. This study is focused on the responses of social media users in Pakistan to the plethora of fake news and an attempt to unearth latent causes shaping their attitudes. Based on a mixed-methods mechanism, the research design is comprised of a quantitative survey methodology entailing one hundred and fifty users actively operating social media platforms belonging to the universities in Pakistan and is supported by qualitative comprehensive interviews of thirty active social media enthusiasts. The study is intended to delve into the diffusion of fake news and its effects on internet users and the online community in Pakistan. The patterns and trends of the spread of disinformation, factors responsible for generating responses and shaping behaviours, and the stratagems opted by the social media operators in Pakistan have been detected. The study highlights the significance of calculated and timely interventions to ward off disinformation, urging to step up media literacy among the consumers of social media in Pakistan.*

Key Words: Diffusion of Disinformation, Fake News, Social Media users, Response Behaviors, Pakistani, Mixed Methods, Emotional Responses, Confirmation Bias, Media Literacy, Political Affiliation

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Introduction

Social media outlets mushroomed at a rapid pace in Pakistan, transforming the nature of information dissemination in a substantial way. The boom of social media platforms enabled users to have a multidimensional understanding of news and comprehend a wide variety of opinions. Nevertheless, this

information revolution of Pakistani social media is not without hazards, striking a disturbing note in information headquarters about "fake news" KAREEM. The extensive diffusion of disinformation empowers fake news to recalibrate public discourse, shatter political stability, and unsettle social cohesion in Pakistan. Against the backdrop of the Pakistani social media landscape, the spread of

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misinformation and disinformation with its extraordinary accessibility bears novel challenges and dire consequences (Batool, Ahmed, Mahmood, & Sharif, 2021). Moreover, a diverse country like Pakistan with its complex socio-political milieu, is dangerously vulnerable to the cataclysmic and catalyzing effects of fake news. It is amply evident that false narratives based on fake news can be conveniently peddled and manipulated to jolt the social fabric of the country. The research paper purports to provide insight into the dissemination of disinformation and its effects on users of social media in Pakistan and gauge their responses to the impact of fake news. Relying on the viewpoints of active social media consumers hailing from various Pakistani universities, the study brings into the limelight the motives, intentions and methods utilized by consumers in dealing with fake news. In this era of digitalization, people around the world are massively using social media as a first-hand source to receive information on the happenings worldwide. Nevertheless, the ease and comfort of social media users have exposed them to fake news, making them easy prey to false narratives and misinformation as social media has now become a den of fake news and disinformation. Thus, like other countries, Pakistan is equally at risk of challenges emanating from the unprecedented spread of disinformation and fake news. In order to tackle and fight off disinformation and develop digital literacy, effective strategies and creative methods and techniques are needed to be devised which can be made possible after having a thorough understanding of how users of social media in Pakistan react to fake news and exploring why they in the first place exposed to such content. The research paper is a critical investigation into the dissemination of disinformation among the users of Pakistani social media. To this end, the study is centred on the students of Pakistani universities. Detecting the patterns and trends in the dissemination of fake news and disinformation diffusion as well as analyzing their responses to fake news led the study to explore the following queries, objectives and targets:

- What are the types of disinformation and what is the nature of sources and misinformation plaguing the users of social media in Pakistan?
- What are the factors impacting and peddling the dissemination of disinformation in the online community?
- Exploring the motives and the causes of individual responses to fake news
- How users of social media in Pakistan combat the catastrophic effects of fake news and disinformation. What are their strategies?

Literature Review

In this age of knowledge revolution and digitalization, the global village of the online community and users of social media are seriously endangered by disinformation as it has surfaced as a paramount challenge in the information world (Beridze & Butcher, 2019). Furthermore, the threat is augmented by the mushrooming growth of social media outlets. In this era of excellence and technological advancement, the proliferation, amplification and creation of misinformation and disinformation have become convenient to massively affect the targeted audience within the twinkling of an eye (Collins, Hoang, Nguyen, & Hwang, 2021). The disinformation easily takes centre stage in polluting the minds of Pakistani social media users with the extensive accessibility of networks and social media outlets.

Diffusion of Disinformation

Detecting the patterns and trends of dissemination of disinformation holds critical importance to evaluate its impact on society. The process through which information explosion, including disinformation, disseminates through networks of social media is famously known as diffusion. The tools for making content viral turn social media into the repository or machinery of disinformation, enabling it to peddle false narratives and set malicious agendas (Tandoc Jr, Lim, & Ling, 2020). In Pakistan, this viral

tool massively provides ample opportunity to influence the speed and extent of disinformation diffusion in view of the size, diversity, and levels of engagement of the online community (Mir & Siddiqui, [2022](#)).

Impact of Disinformation on Pakistani Society

Disinformation does not carry a marginal impact on Pakistani society. Rather, it has far-reaching implications in undermining public opinion, creating a trust deficit in institutions and framing public discourse. These repercussions could reinforce polarization and divisions in society. In a society like Pakistan, where fault lines of ethnicity, religious tensions and political division possess the potential to rattle the foundations of the state, the disinformation could further catalyze divisions within society and impede the emergence of a well-informed citizenry (Haider, [2022](#)). Similarly, disinformation can seriously jeopardize the smooth functioning and systematic working of health care, economic growth and national security (Ammara Malik, Bashir, & Mahmood, [2023](#)).

Response to Disinformation

The users of social media have exhibited a widely varied spectrum of responses to disinformation. It is noted that some users may unconsciously project false information while certain professionals took pains actively and consciously to carry out fact-checking and debunking attempts (Ireton & Posetti, [2018](#)). The credibility of information sources, emotional responses, cognitive biases and personal beliefs are but a few factors that impact and condition responses (Barzilai & Chinn, [2020](#)). Therefore, an effective media strategy to combat disinformation is only possible when understanding the working of social media in Pakistan is complete and the concerned authorities can strategize accordingly. Additionally, educational programs are critically important to enhancing media literacy in this respect (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, [2019](#); Shahzad & Khan, [2022](#)).

Role of Social Media in Disinformation Spread

Disinformation is peddled mainly owing to the mushrooming growth of social media outlets as they pave the way for a fast-paced proliferation of disinformation by providing a conducive environment to the handlers of false information (Qureshi, [2010](#)). Furthermore, the absence of stringent fact-checking mechanisms added to the dissemination of false information. Social media outlets are specially equipped with particularly designed algorithms and recommendation techniques that could potentially be hijacked and used for the spread of disinformation by prioritizing engagement over accuracy (Ng & Taeihagh, [2021](#)). The disinformation goes immediately viral for the reasons that social media afford anonymity, network effects and echo chambers. The study examined how social media functioned and how it contributes to the dissemination of disinformation among users in Pakistan, providing insights into these challenges. Pakistan is frightfully challenged and threatened by the growing danger of disinformation as it poses mounting challenges through social media (Kareem & Awan, [2019](#)). Fake news could potentially shatter the social fabric, shake up the foundations and mislead public opinions by reinforcing social, political, and cultural tensions. Owing to the dearth of research and surveys to measure up the impact of fake news concerning how the users of social media in Pakistan react to fake news, the managers and controlling authorities of information are confronted with a dilemma to devise effective strategies to combat fake news and stem flow of disinformation (Ali & Qazi, [2023](#)). By devising and discovering apposite strategies and befitting mechanisms, the impact of disinformation and misinformation could be mitigated and with the promotion of media literacy, the users can be motivated and guided to avoid the onslaught of fake news. Furthermore, in the dynamism and vibrancy of the global geopolitical environment where disinformation is accorded a major challenge and arena to overcome, the extraordinary

social-cultural context of Pakistan is often overlooked and neglected in the research community. That negligence necessitates an extensive and in-depth enquiry into the dissemination of disinformation particularly within Pakistan (Kareem & Awan, 2019). Thus, the response strategies need to be explored as to how the users of social media in Pakistan operate to tackle the disinformation and impact their behaviours. In this scenario, the research paper intends to factor in the below-mentioned problem statement: what kind of patterns Pakistani social media users are confronted with in dealing with disinformation (Amara Malik, Islam, & Mahmood, 2022). What methods do they opt for to combat fake news? Moreover, how their response behaviour is being shaped by the underlying factors? The study aims to answer these queries by furnishing valuable wisdom into the dissemination of disinformation in Pakistan. The findings would help develop and make targeted interventions which can effectively fight off fake news and focus efforts on media literacy.

Methodology

The mixed-method approach is a guiding principle for research design with the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In order to compile data from a wide array of social media consumers, the surveys have been conducted in line with quantitative methods to detect trends and patterns and at the same time, the experiences, mindsets and predilections of the chosen participants have been explored through interviews in the category of qualitative methodology. One hundred and fifty very active social media consumers have been classified for the sample in the survey from across the universities in Pakistan. In order to maintain the diversity of views in collecting data from the survey, the purposive sampling technique has been applied for the selection of users and participants. Their active interface

with the content of news and sustained connection with the news flow forms the basis of the sample for choosing their frequency of social media use. The purposive and snowball sampling technique has been adopted to conduct qualitative interviews of thirty active users of social media. The involvement of the users with the news flow and their maximum usage of social media became the base for the selection of participants. Later, in order to include more participants in the research, additional participants were contacted by obtaining referrals from the initial interviewees. To this end, the methodology was based on snowball sampling. The questionnaire in the survey was comprised of queries pertaining to the demographics, exposure to fake news, disinformation and patterns of social media. The privacy of the participants in line with the research ethics was kept intact by administering the questionnaire electronically and their anonymity was ensured. In-depth interviews were conducted with the selected participants for the compilation of qualitative data. The participants showed a willingness to interview them face-to-face and some of them were available via video conferencing mechanisms. Their availability and their preferences were deciding factors in the compilation of qualitative data. The interview was semi-structured in order to pose open-ended queries and carry out follow-up probes. The interviewees furnished the data with their unique and exclusive experiences and engagement with the fake news and recorded their reactions in the interviews and shed light on the underlying causes of their behaviours. Thus, with the application of a mixed method mechanism, the research design is a quadrangle of quantitative and qualitative outcomes and results, which add to the existing corpus of knowledge the further understanding of the users of social media in Pakistan consumed fake news and react to its effects and what the underlying caused in generating their responses.

Table 1*Patterns of Disinformation Diffusion*

Social Media Platform	Frequency of Fake News Exposure	Percentage of Respondents
Facebook	High	45%
Twitter	Moderate	30%
WhatsApp	Low	15%
Instagram	Moderate	10%

Interpretative Explanation: The finding in Table 1 elucidates the intensity of dissemination of fake news and disinformation diffusion by breaking the social media outlets into four categories comprising Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram which manifests the pattern of diffusion all across the social media houses used by Pakistani consumers. The study indicates that Facebook has emerged as the hub of fake, flawed and faulty news marking the highest frequency. The high exposure reported by the respondents on Facebook constitutes 45% of the Table. Nevertheless, Twitter and Instagram have been detected and counted as moderate platforms for generating fake news and disseminating disinformation. Their rate of exposure has been identified as 30% and 10% respectively. As for WhatsApp, private messages are mostly conveyed using this social media facility. The exposure of respondents on WhatsApp has been gauged up to 15 % for fake news. In light of these findings, it is conveniently identified which social media centres are in bad need of timely interventions to combat fake news and counter disinformation.

Factors Responsible for Generating Response Strategy to Fake News

Table 2*Factors Influencing Response to Fake News*

Factors	Percentage of Respondents
Political Affiliation	35%
Personal Beliefs and Opinions	25%
Trust in News Sources	20%
Information Verification Skills	10%
Influence of Peers and Social Groups	10%

Interpretation: Table 2 show the factors that shape the responses of the users of social media in Pakistan to the onslaught of fake news, listing them in categories of political affiliation, personal beliefs and opinion, trust in news sources, information verification skills and influence of peers and social groups. The findings show that thirty-five per cent of the respondents were quoted to confess that their reactions were highly impacted by their leanings toward political associations. Thus, political affiliation turns out to be a leading factor in formulating the response of Pakistani social media users to fake news. Additionally, the response was also filtered by personal beliefs and their opinionated mind to fake news as well, which constitutes 25% of

respondents accepting its influence on their perspectives and thoughts. Furthermore, the research also showed that the majority of news sources have lost their credibility which results in the users being susceptible to fake news. That makes up 20% of respondents. The response reaction, attitude and behaviour are also formulated by factoring into information verification skills, which make up 10 per cent of participants. Moreover, 10% of respondents show that peers and social groups are also responsible for the spread of fake news. Thus, the results of the study manifest that the cobweb network of a myriad of factors is unavoidable in formulating the individuals' response to disinformation.

Table 3

Strategies for Identifying and Combating Disinformation

Strategies	Percentage of Respondents
Cross-checking with multiple sources	40%
Fact-checking websites and organizations	30%
Relying on trusted news sources	20%
Engaging in critical thinking	5%
Reporting fake news to platforms	5%

Interpretation: Table 3 presents a graphic description of the methods and strategies opted by the users of social media in Pakistan to keep from disinformation and counter fake news. The findings outline that the often-used methodology to counter fake news and disinformation is cross-checking information with many various sources. The results show that 40% of the respondents have applied this methodology. 30% of the users have corroborated that they used fact-checking websites and organizations to avoid being affected by fake news. Unfortunately, only 20% and 10% of the respondents have been identified as using critical thinking and relying on trusted news sources respectively to combat fake news and combat disinformation. Furthermore, the tendency to report fake news has also been found as the least applied technique by the users, which make up only 5% of the respondents. The outcomes of the research show the significance of taking measures to promote media literacy and build skills for critical thinking among the consumers of social media to augment their capability to fight off disinformation effectively. On the whole, the patterns of disinformation and growing trends of fake news have been highlighted in a glaring way in the findings. The study highlights the factors prominently shaping behaviour and stresses the strategies opted for by the users of social media in Pakistan. Taking stock of these patterns and detecting the patterns, the power that could make strategies to plant targeted interventions to counter fake news, and fight off propaganda being peddled through disinformation and steps could be guided to promote media literacy among the internet users and online community in Pakistan.

Qualitative Findings

In-depth insights have been derived from conducting qualitative interviews with 30 chosen participants. The diffusion of fake news and the dissemination of disinformation have been gauged and measured up by employing thematic analysis of the interviews. In the below-mentioned outcomes, each has been illustrated by using the findings, followed by quotes from the participants:

Fake News & Emotional Responses: Fake news has generated emotional responses and the respondents revealed that they grew sentimental when encountering the fake content on social media outlets. Anger, frustration, and disappointment were the most common expression of emotions in their exposure to fake content on social media and disinformation. According to a participant, "It's extremely painful to find faulty information being disseminated. The fake content enraged me because people trust them without making an effort to probe it for authenticity."

Confirmation Bias and Selective Engagement: Confirmation prejudice played a key role duly verified by many respondents in their reactions to fake news. They acknowledged that they were naturally aligned with the news which matches their preformed beliefs and opinions. One respondent expressed, "I'm guilty of it too. If a news article supports my viewpoint, I'm more likely to share it without verifying."

Lack of Media Literacy and Information Verification Skills: The participant have been found largely and unfortunately less media literate and poor in skills at information verification methods. Several participants

stated the odds of finding credible and reliable sources and were less equipped in separating genuine news from fake news. Another participant expressed, "I struggle to identify fake news because I don't know how to verify information. It's a skill we should be taught in schools."

Trust in Personal Networks and Peers: The response to fake news was massively conditioned by the peers and personal networks as highlighted by the participants. They acknowledge that their reactions were mostly based on the suggestions and recommendations of friends and family. One participant revealed, "If someone I trust shares a news article, I'm more likely to believe it and share it myself without verifying."

Impact of Political Affiliation: In their response and reactions to fake news, the participants have been identified as highly influenced by political leanings and affiliations, making it the more prominent and key factor in determining the response to fake news. Many express that the news content was filtered and conditioned by the beliefs and opinions of the participants in their response to fake news and disinformation. In the words of one participant mentioned, "As a supporter of a certain political party, I'm more likely to amplify news that supports our agenda, even if it's fake."

The results of the research show the impact of emotions in strategies to counter fake news, the role of confirmation prejudice and personal networks, and the indispensability of enhanced media literacy among the users of social media in Pakistan. The immense insights and valuable input obtained by the participants and derived from their quotes equally accentuate the importance of a deeper understanding of the themes as guided in the study. These results underpin the significance of timely steps to ensure targeted interventions to remedy the malaise of misinformation, disinformation and fake news. Furthermore, there is a dire need to horn critical thinking and skills to shield the users of social media in Pakistan from this impact.

Conclusion

The uncontrolled and spontaneous surge of disinformation, misinformation and the explosion of fake news in Pakistani society constitute an ever-growing yet irresistible challenge, which is taking public opinion in its manifold and destabilizing the very foundation of social cohesion, and destroying political discourse. This research unearthed how the users and consumers of social media in Pakistan react to fake news and spotted the multiple implicit and explicit factors that formulate their behaviours. Relying on mixed-method strategies, clubbed with a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, a myriad of core findings surfaced.

In the first place, the research elucidates that there are a number of patterns and trends of misinformation and disinformation all across social media outlets. Facebook turned out to be the major repository and larger source of pervasive fake news on the social media landscape. Then, Twitter and Instagram clinched the moderate position in this measurement and investigation over the course. However, WhatsApp has been identified mostly as the key engine of private text messages with minimal impact of fake news i.e. 10 %. The outcomes and results of the study lay stress the significance of immediate and prompt targeted interventions to the outlets where fake news is most pervasive.

In the second place, the response of the users of social media in Pakistan has been made prominent by identifying factors shaping their responses and attitudes. Party affiliations, political leanings, and predilections have been found as playing a key role in shaping their responses to fake news. The participants recognized that their responses were particularly determined by their political associations in encountering fake news. Their behaviours and attitudes were conditioned by personal beliefs and opinions, coupled with their faith in the credibility of news sources and information verification skills. Furthermore, the impact of peers and social groups played a marked role in generating reactions to fake news. The

crisscrossing between individual viewpoints, manifold social impact, and cognitive biases in the formulation of attitudes and setting the agenda to counter fake news was amply highlighted by the set of these factors. Moreover, the methods and mechanisms adopted by the users of social media in Pakistan to decipher the complex influence of disinformation and fake news were traced and highlighted by the research paper. The most often applied method emerged to be cross-checking information against multiple sources. Then, credible news sources and fact-checking outlets took the second lead in the strategy to counter fake news. Nevertheless, the study reaches the conclusion that critical thinking needs to be intervened on a priority basis by sensitizing the users of social media in Pakistan through media literacy. On the whole, the research article takes a deep dive into the convoluted world of misinformation and the diffusion of disinformation and how the users in Pakistan react to fake news. The results underline the urgency to ensure targeted interventions that take into account

the extraordinary socio-cultural context of Pakistan. It is essential to fight off disinformation, ward off misinformation and counter fake news so that the users may be sensitized and equipped with enhanced media literacy, may be trained in critical thinking and be imparted training in responsible online behaviour by the policymakers and educators and social media operators. That intent can create a stable and cohesive society on strong and solid foundations. Finally, this can be achieved by opting for a multidimensional strategy, involving technological interventions, and fresh policy orientations and spreading education throughout the media landscape. A more informed and observant online community can be developed only by imparting the necessary skills and knowledge and empowering Pakistani social media users. Thus, a healthier information ecosystem free of fake news, un-plagued by disinformation and unpolluted by misinformation can be put in place in light of the study's findings.

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